

# The Pragmatic Functions of the Chinese Modal Auxiliaries -- In reference to Neng Verb Group

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## 提要

汉语助动词是外国学生学习汉语的难点之一。无论是从汉语本体的角度，还是从汉语作为第二语言学习的角度，对汉语助动词的语用功能的考察，前人的研究基本是空白。类似的研究对深化对汉语的研究，进一步提高对外汉语教学的有效性是不可或缺的，因为语言的语用功能直接体现为如何用语言完成表达和交际。本文从对外汉语教和学的角度，选取助动词中最常用的“能”类助动词，对其中的四个助动词（能，可以，会，可能）的语用功能进行了详细列举和分析，研究的成果揭示了语言中语法形式，语义和语言功能的密切关系。

## 1. Introduction

The acquisition of Chinese modal auxiliary verbs (such as 能, 可以, 会, 应该.....) is highly complex for learners of Chinese (Ji, 1992; Tao, 1991; Xiong; 1996; Chen, 2002), and the learners continue to use them inaccurately, even at advanced level. This raises several

questions: Why is there a lack of mastery of the Chinese modal auxiliary verbs by learners? Where do their problems come from? Do we really understand the aspects of learning process? Is instruction helpful and effective?

In the studies of teaching English modal auxiliary verbs, Holmes (1988) noted that most of textbooks do not adequately cover modals, if they cover them at all. Kärkkäinen (1992) pointed out that a lack of research into the modals' pragmatic functions leads to the neglect of explicit teaching of the modal verb forms.

This paper sheds light on the teaching of Chinese modal auxiliary verbs as a second/ foreign language by exploring their specific pragmatic functions.

## **2. Literature Review**

The studies of mood or modality have been related to each other for centuries and can be traced back to debates in the literature of logical and philosophical studies. From the perspective of language, mood (modal, -ity) is defined by Crystal (2003, p. 299) as follows:

Mood (“modality”, or “mode”) refers to a set of SYNTACTIC AND SEMANTIC CONTRASTS signaled by alternative PARADIGMS of the verb, e.g. INDICATIVE (the UNMARKED form), SUBJUNCTIVE, IMPERATIVE. Semantically, a wide range of meanings is involved, especially attitudes on the part of the speaker towards the factual content of the utterance, e.g. uncertainty, definiteness, vagueness, possibility.

Syntactically, these contrasts may be signaled by alternative INFLECTIONAL forms of a verb, or by using AUXILIARIES.

From this definition, it can be interpreted that mood or modality is a common category in language, and is a combination of syntactic elements (alternative PARADIGMS of the verb), semantic elements (a wide range of meanings) and pragmatic elements (including attitudes on the part of the speaker towards the factual content of the utterance).

Extending this argument, therefore, meanings such as permission, obligation, volition, possibility, necessity and prediction and so on can be expressed in different languages by alternative PARADIGMS of the verb. While it may not be possible to easily claim universality for these aforementioned meanings, it is highly likely that substantial parts of these meanings will be shared between languages (and cultures). One consequence of this is that the language users will need to understand how these meaning are expressed and the language learners will need to discover whether, and if so, how these meanings are realized differently in a new language.

Research on L1 development (Halliday, 1975; Wells, 1979, 1985; Perkins, 1983; Richards, 1990; Papafragou, 2000) claims that the acquisition of the modal auxiliary is particularly interesting because it is important in a child's linguistic development in relation to the acquisition stage, rate, variation and communicative strategies.

Richards' (1990, p. 5) , for example, points out that "Despite the possibility of alternative strategies to

express auxiliary meaning, however, an increasing mastery of the syntax, semantics and pragmatics of auxiliary usage is an inextricable part of language development from an early stage.”

Although the importance of the pragmatic functions has been long recognized because it is so closely related to the language use and speech acts, the pragmatic studies of modal auxiliaries are limited.

The relevant research is on children’s use of specific forms or speech acts, such as indirect requests (Menyuk, 1969; Perkins, 1983; Ervin-Tripp & Goron, 1986). Guo (1994) was the first to study the full range of sentence forms, semantic meanings, and discourse functions of Mandarin Chinese modal auxiliaries in children’s speech. He investigated the different uses of eleven major modal auxiliaries: yao (want), xiang (desire), xihuan (like), yuanyi (willing), hui (know-how-to) neng (can), dei (have to), gai (should), keyi (allow) and yong (need). He used these to determine how extensively meaning and form pairs were used in children’s daily interactive activities for the specific interpersonal and social goals the child speakers intended to achieve and how the uses of these modal auxiliaries were different among the 3-, 5-, and 7-year old children and what the developmental trend looked like. His strong emphasis on the relationships between social interaction, meaning and grammatical form was based on Halliday’s (1975) functional perspective that “modal auxiliaries provide a special illustrative example for the functionalist view because of their semi-opaque semantic and semi-grammatical status” (p. 5). Forty specific discourse functions including the three sub-categories of interpersonal oriented functions, informational oriented

functions and logical reasoning functions were used to categorize his data. For example, the study of *neng* shows the order of development of the different meanings from physical ability to permission to epistemic uses. All three meanings serve a common interpersonal function in dialogic discourse: a challenge to the addressee whereby the change in the meaning of *neng* is primarily motivated by this interpersonal function of challenge (Guo, 1995, p. 207).

Guo's (1994) findings of the development pattern of *neng* (from physical ability to permission to epistemic uses) in relation to interpersonal functions are consistent with the view that early modals are "without exception interpersonal and action-oriented" (Fletcher, 1979, p. 282). He also concluded that modals do not originate from the pragmatic performative use although they soon come to be used mainly for pragmatic purposes. The studies of pragmatic acquisition of modal auxiliaries shows that the task of pragmatic acquisition is incorporated with syntactic and semantic development, but the developmental patterns in these three dimensions may vary because of individual differences.

Some research have been conducted in the investigation of the L2 learners' inter-language pragmatic development, regarding appropriateness or inappropriateness when using the modal auxiliary verbs to realize some speech acts, such as request and refusal. In that way, modal auxiliary verbs have been researched as an indicator of the transfer or surrender of L1 cultural values and norms rather than as a grammatical category. As a marker of pragmatic integration, the studies reveal inconsistent relationships between linguistic knowledge and pragmatic competence. The inconsistency of

relationships holds true for different ages, length of exposure to the L2 and level of L2 proficiency (Kasper, 1979; Basham & Kwachka, 1989; Ellis, 1992; Hill, 1997; Salsbury & Bardovi-Harlig, 2000, 2001,).

The literature shows that the pragmatic functions of modal auxiliaries are important in many ways in relation to how people express their subjective attitude, prediction and judgments. Therefore, a detailed exploration of the pragmatic functions of the Chinese modal auxiliary verbs becomes one of the essentials parts in the study of the Chinese auxiliaries.

### **3. The Neng Verb Group**

Theoretically, Chinese auxiliary verbs are a finite set. Researchers agree that the modal auxiliaries exist both as a consistent formal system subject to some rules and as a group of semantic elements with individual variations in meaning. There are a few sub groups being gathered according to their meaning clusters.

In this paper, I have selected the Chinese modal auxiliary Neng Verb Group (NVG), which includes neng, keyi, hui and keneng as the major target of the study. The modal auxiliary verbs are clustered around particular semantic concepts. This Neng Verb Group (NVG) shares the meaning cluster of possibility, ability and permission.

Leech (1987, p. 71) explains the modal auxiliaries in general:

What makes it so difficult to account for the use of these words is that their meaning has

both a logical and a practical (or pragmatic) element.

A modal auxiliary always has a number of distinct, yet related meanings. Previous studies of the semantics of modal auxiliaries have mainly concentrated on their referential meanings (Lü, 1979 etc.). Few studies have explored pragmatic meanings (Xiong, 1994) (such as request, suggestion, promising).

The meanings of the NVG words traditionally incorporated three main conventional modal rubrics: ability, permission and possibility. Some scholars Lü (1979) etc, think the distinction between *neng* and *keyi* is that *neng* is frequently used to express the sense of ability, whereas *keyi* is frequently used to express the sense of possibility. However, Fu and Zhou (1991) investigated the Chinese modal auxiliaries based on statistics derived from the analysis of dialogues (play scripts) and concluded that in terms of expressing the meaning of “possibility”, *neng* is most frequently used in the interrogative sentence (64.3%) and seldom in affirmative sentences (6%); but *hui* is used more frequently in affirmative sentences (45%) rather than in interrogative sentences (20.2%). Guo’s (2005) 1, 8500, 000-word corpus based study provided more statistics about the different frequencies of using different modals and different meanings of a modal. For example, he found that *neng* was used in 295 declarative sentences, 83% of its usage was to express “ability” and 17% to express “root possibility”. Moreover, the constraints from the syntactic frames and pragmatic requirements also influence the meaning distribution of the modal auxiliary verbs. Table 2.1 (Guo, 2005, p. 18-19) shows that when the agent of the sentence is expressed in different personal pronouns the frequencies would be

varied. It can be seen that one of keyi's meanings, "permission", is always with the use of 2<sup>nd</sup> personal pronoun, whereas when the subject is 1<sup>st</sup> personal pronoun, most of the meaning of keyi is "root possibility".

Table 2.1 Frequency of the meanings distribution of keyi (Guo, 2005)

keyi		Total	Permis- sion	Root possibility	Ability	Evaluate
Ni (2 <sup>nd</sup> person) + keyi +VP	Amount	157	129	26	2	0
	%	100	82.2	16.5	1.3	0
Wo (1 <sup>st</sup> person) + keyi + VP	Amount	181	19	156	6	0
	%	100	10.5	86.2	3.3	0

The different distribution of the NVG words provides significant implications. It means that the NVG words do not share the same importance in being used to express the different meanings. The meaning overlaps between and within the NVG words in fact have been distributed in contexts. Each word has its major roles of different pragmatic functions.

#### 4. The pragmatic functions of the NVG words

The issue of whether to use modal auxiliaries in an utterance largely depends on the speaker's communicative intent. With modal auxiliaries, the utterance focuses on making comments and judgments, and the resulting utterances are colored by the speaker's involvement in the form of opinion, affect, or personal dynamics so that an utterance that contains modal auxiliaries is more complex in meaning than an

utterance without modal auxiliaries, although the underlying grammatical structures may be the same. There are correlated relationships between the meanings and the functions in the NVG, which are summarized in Table 3.1 and exemplified below.

Table 3.1 Relationship between meanings and functions in the NVG (Xiong)

Meaning	Function	The NVG words	Note
Possibility	Prediction	neng, keyi, hui, keneng	
	Hypothesis	neng, keyi, hui, keneng	
	Promise	neng, keyi, hui	The subject is the first person pronoun.
	Likelihood, truth	hui	
Permission	Granting/asking permission	neng, keyi	keyi is more frequent. Negative form is bu neng
	Suggestion/feasibility	keyi	Negative form is bu neng
	Request	neng, keyi	Only keyi can be used in independent response.
Ability	Showing ability/boasting	neng, keyi	
	Showing great skill	hui	

1. Related to the meaning “possibility”, there are three basic pragmatic functions: prediction, hypothesis, and promise. All four NVG words can be used to express one or more aspects of the function of possibility, but there are differences as shown below:

## (1) Prediction

<i>NVG words</i>	<i>pragmatic features</i>	<i>semantic features</i>
<i>Neng/ keyi</i>	active/ preferred	subjective
<i>keneng</i>	medium/ non-preferred	↓ ↑
<i>hui</i>	active/medium/non-preferred	objective

E.g. 3-1

多吃肉 能/可以/可能/会 长胖。

duo chi rou neng/ keyi zhang pang. (Speaker hopes to become fat)

duo chi rou keneng zhang pang. (The result of eating more meat is becoming fat)

duo chi rou hui zhang pang. (It is possible the tendency of eating more meat will make you fat.)

More eat meat AUX grow fat

Eat more meat **can** put on weight.

## (2) Hypothesis

E.g. 3-2

要是咱们的买卖越做越好，我能不给你长工钱吗？

Yaoshi zanmen de maimai yue zuo yue hao, wo neng bu gei ni zhang gongqian ma?

If 1PL POSS business getting better, 1SG AUX NEG.  
give you raise in salary

If the business has improved, wouldn't you have got a raise?

(3) Promise: This meaning cannot be expressed through the use of keneng, because keneng is used to express a

tentative possibility, therefore the mood is not strong enough for making a promise.

E.g. 3-3

我可以 给你一个星期的假期。

Wo keyi gei ni yi ge xingqi de jiaqi

1SG. AUX give you one CL week MOD holiday

I can give you one-week holiday.

(4) Likelihood, truth. Only hui has this sense.

E.g. 3-4

人都是会死的。

Ren dou shi hui si de

Person all be AUX die PRT

Anyone can die.

2 Related to the meaning “permission”, there are three pragmatic functions. They are granting/asking permission, suggestion and request, which are expressed by neng and keyi.

(5) Granting / Asking permission

E.g. 3-5

你可以走了。(In relation to something within the authority of the speaker)

Ni keyi zou le

2SG. AUX zou PRT

You can/may leave.

(6) Suggestion

E.g. 3-6

处长清闲的时候，可以来跳跳舞，玩玩牌，喝喝咖啡。(From “Teahouse”, 老舍《茶馆》)

Chuzhang qingxian de shihou, keyi lai tiaotiao wu, wanwan pai, hehe kafei.

Sir leisure DET time, AUX come dance, play card, drink coffee

When you've got time to kill, sir, you can enjoy dancing, cards and coffee.

(7) Request: it is an interrogative question, requesting a behavior from the interlocutor rather than information. The speaker wishes the listener to do something for him/her.

E.g. 3-7

A: 能不能把书递给我?

Neng bu neng ba shu di gei wo?

AUX NEG. AUX PREP book pass 1SG

Can/ could you pass me the book?

B1: (no response just passes the book.)

B2: 好的。/ 行。/ 可以。

Hao de./ xing./ keyi

Good PRT/ all right/ AUX

Ok, all right.

\*B3: 能。/ 我能。

Neng/ wo neng.

AUX / 1SG. AUX

Can / I can

3. Related to the meaning of “ability”, there is a pragmatic function which can be labeled as showing ability/boasting, in which neng and keyi can be used.

(8) Showing ability/ boasting

E.g. 3-8

小王能一口气喝八瓶啤酒。

Xiaowang neng yi kou qi he ba pin piju

Little wang AUX one CL breath drink eight CL beer

Xiaowang can drink eight beers in one go.

(9) Showing great skill, only hui applies in this case.

E.g. 3-9

张三很会说话

Zhangsan hen hui shuohua.

Zhangsan (name of person) very AUX talk

Zhangsan is very eloquent.

Therefore, related to each basic meaning rubric, there are specific embedded pragmatic functions, which enable the speakers to have options to choose the different meanings and pragmatic functions to communicate.

Using modal auxiliaries such as the NVG words can demonstrate the relationship not only between the meaning and the function, but also between the speaker and the listener. For example, in the case of expressing the meaning “permission” involves the granting of permission and asking for permission. When the subject uses different pronouns, the choice of which pronoun to use usually relates to the authority attached to either the speaker or the listener.

E.g. 3-10

我可以走了吗? (The authority of the listener by using 1<sup>st</sup> person pronoun.)

Wo keyi zou le ma?  
1SG AUX go PRF PRT  
Can / May I leave?

你可以走了。(The authority of the speaker by using 2<sup>nd</sup>  
person pronoun.)  
2SG AUX zou PRF  
You can/may leave.

The NVG word that is included in the utterance can also show the intention and the attitude of the speaker. As in Example 3-1, using *hui* and *keneng* means a kind of objective tendency, whereas using *neng* and *keyi* implies the speakers' wish or desire.

## 5. Conclusion and Implications

From the above analyses and description in sections 4 and 5, it can be seen that the pragmatic functions of the Chinese modal auxiliary words play a very important role in communication. Therefore, they comprise a necessary component of second or foreign language teaching and learning, which will need to be taken account in exploring the process of the acquisition of Chinese. Furthermore, this description has underlined the view that the Chinese modal auxiliary words consist of semantic, syntactic and pragmatic layers that only partially collocate. In essence, the three layers act largely independently to provide the subtle and varied meaning potential of the Chinese modal auxiliary words. It does not appear possible to outline any singular or dominating relationship between particular words, their semantic and pragmatic meanings and the syntactic forms in which they appear.

In current teaching practice for the Chinese modal auxiliary verbs, the syntax and the core meaning are taught in the early stages, but teaching is limited to the basic structure. Beyond the basic structure and the core meanings, the complex collocations of syntax and semantics have not been woven into the syllabus systematically. The pragmatic functions of the NVG words, which are context dependent, have not received enough attention. There is a gap between what we design for the teaching and what the learners need to learn in terms of the Chinese modal auxiliaries.

If a teacher assumes that teaching the NVG words can be completed in a few lessons at the basic level, the students will certainly have some problems. Despite the apparent mastery of the syntax of the basic structure in early stage, clearly there are other substantial levels of meanings and pragmatic functions that the learners need to grasp. These analyses involve the relationship between syntax and lexis, which also include the relationships between syntax, semantics and pragmatics. Therefore, any instruction program dealing with this area needs to have later lesson activities that will help learners retrieve the earlier knowledge and re-examine it in the light of more refined semantic and pragmatic differentiation.

Thus, it can be concluded that the teaching of the NVG would be better if it were extended beyond the basic level. The learners need time to discover the relationships between items. Consequently, we know that a “one size fits all” teaching approach is not going to work because it is not sufficient to meet the needs of the L2 learners of Chinese.

## Conventions, Translations and Abbreviations

(1) Each Chinese example has two lines of English below it. In the line immediately below the example, I have attempted to gloss each Chinese character with the clearest and most literal English equivalent possible. In the second line I put a translation of the whole utterance into idiomatic English. ( ) is used to supply some constituents omitted in Chinese but essential in English version.

(2) Pinyin, which is the official Romanization system of Chinese used to spell out the sound, is given below each character line.

(3) Chinese nouns in general do not indicate singularity versus plurality. I gloss all nouns as singular nouns in English.

(4) Chinese has no grammatical categories of tense, so I have chosen the appropriate tense in each case according to the context.

(5) Chinese pronouns make no distinction between masculine and feminine. I have glossed them as 1, 2, 3 plus SG or PL, for example “Wo (I)” glossed as 1SG.

(6) ( ) is used to supply some constituents omitted in Chinese but essential in English version.

(7) \*: an utterance that is either structurally or semantically unacceptable to native speakers

(8) (?): an utterance that is odd and can not be translated as the whole, but not necessarily unacceptable

(9) Special Chinese grammatical abbreviations are listed below:

CL: classifier

PL: plural

SG: singular

PRT: utterance-final particle

NEG: negative  
POSS: possession (de)  
MOD: modifier (de)  
COMP: complementizer of verb  
PRF: perfective (le)  
PROG: progressive (-zhe, zai)  
EXPR: experiential (guo)  
AUX: modal auxiliary verb

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